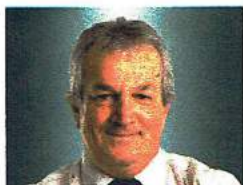


JOHN DURIE



Sir Rod Eddington's biggest fear is losing the gift of curiosity, which he credits as the primary reason for his success in business, along with the ability to learn from and engage with people.

One of Australia's most accomplished business people, Eddington says the two most important things in his background were "growing up in the bush and team sports".

The bush imbued Eddington with a strong sense of community and giving back, and a basic humility that means despite his stellar, highly credentialed career, he treats everyone as being as important as the last person.

An A grade cricketer and footballer at the University of Western Australia, he described himself in an interview as competent rather than brilliant, "but team work taught me to work together under pressure".

But along the way he played with some of the greats, with his UWA cricket captains including Rod March and John Inverarity, who both went on to play for Australia.

"I learned a lot from people," he says.

His mother and father met at the Perth Modern School, a selective high school that counted the late Bob Hawke as a student.

His parents both worked with the Commonwealth Bank, and it was through the bank that he received his rural upbringing as the family moved from town to town, staying in bank cottages as they transferred to a new branch.

His father was a former RAAF pilot and a handy cricketer, and the importance of friendship and sport were instilled in Eddington as a child.

By the time he was ready for senior school, the family had moved back to Perth, and Eddington went to Christ Church Grammar, where he excelled at maths

and physics, leading him into engineering at UWA.

It was there he earned the nickname "God" because of his stellar grades while playing sport and enjoying the best of what the university could offer.

He also developed one of his other great passions — Asia.

"In my class, there were students from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and when we went out for dinner, it was a Chinese restaurant somewhere," he said.

This interest in Asia was the key reason his first post-university job was with John Swire and Sons, which had extensive interests through Asia.

This was the reason why Eddington wanted to work for the

company. A Rhodes Scholar to Oxford, Eddington completed a PhD in engineering and stayed on as a research lecturer there.

Eddington says engineering is the base for a lot of business careers because "it teaches you to think in straight lines, gather data and test it and build practical models to solve problems.

"It was the application of science to the real world and it taught you an analytic-based approach to business.

"Engineering teaches you to think using information and data."

At Oxford, his lead teacher "taught me to capture the essence of an issue succinctly — he taught me clarity and discipline."

This was a long way from one

The path from bush to boardroom



Rod Eddington

of first jobs as a postie in rural Western Australia "where you learned a lot about different kinds of dogs".

The Swire job, Eddington says, "was a great stroke of luck", and having started as a management trainee, it took him to Korea, Japan and Hong Kong in com-

mercial jobs and sales jobs, and "they invested in me, including courses at Insead and Stanford".

He ended up running Swire's Cathay Pacific airline, which followed an intensive few years working in every part of the airline from engineering to operations, finance and people.

Being a leader, he says, is all about "communication, teamwork and demonstrating what you wanted".

"When you have direct reports, you have to work as a team and, importantly, play the ball, not the man," he says.

As chief of British Airways, he learned by talking with everyone from staff to customers and suppliers to see how they thought about

the airline and learning in an open way and "not jumping to conclusions".

While at Cathay, he became a director at News Corp (publisher of this newspaper), starting a new career as a non-executive director.

"Executives are the ones who have to implement the strategy while the directors help set the course and monitor," he says.

"The difficult thing for some directors is when they suggest something to management they might ultimately ignore, which for some takes some getting used to."

"As an executive we wanted boards to challenge us because that way we made better decisions."

While having time on a range of boards including Rio Tinto, Eddington prefers to sit on boards where there are major family shareholders such as Rupert Murdoch at News Corp, Anthony Pratt at Visy and the Kadoorie family at China Light & Power.

"They tend to take a long-term view and in the process look after small shareholders," he says.

Corporate governance rules, he says, work best on a "comply or explain model, or guidelines — not law" because different models work with different people.

The man who hired him as British Airways chief, the late Lord Colin Marshall, was the former chief executive.

That's frowned on in some quarters, but for Eddington it worked superbly.

The other leg to Eddington's career is what he calls his "national service", including roles as head of Infrastructure Australia, Melbourne Major Events, landmark reports for the UK government on transport needs and reports for the Victorian government.